

Homily For 21st Sunday in Ordinary time-Year C 2019

We hear some startling words from the mouth of Jesus in our Gospel today that at first glance, seem to be completely out of character for him. He tells his disciples that he has come not to bring peace, but rather division and that this division will extend to even the closest of relationships among family members. But isn't Jesus supposed to be the Prince of Peace? Yes! But he is the bringer of a peace that comes from uncompromising divine love-and this is sure to cause earthly division between those who accept Christ's offer of divine love and those who reject it. Jesus explains this earlier in the Gospel where he gives the reason for this division. **"I have come to set the earth on fire and how I wish it was already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!"**

What is going on here? We have to remember that Jesus is on a mission from the Father to win us back to himself. After sinning, humanity is divided and at odds with God and with one another-our relationship with him (and by extension others) has been gravely damaged. We no longer look upon God with love and trust, but instead with hostility, suspicion, indifference, and fear. Jesus' anguish comes from this reality. He longs to have the love that he has for each one of us returned to him, yet he recognizes that due to the hardness of man's heart, this won't happen until he goes through his "baptism" that is, his Passion-where he will prove his complete and uncompromising love for us that will lead to his death and ultimately his resurrection. It is only after God's divine love "sets the world on fire" through Jesus' death on the cross, that our hearts can be set ablaze with that same love for him because we have finally come to realize the depth of his love for us. This is why Jesus longs to complete his Passion-

because only then will each person know how infinitely precious they are to him-so precious that they were worth the price of his life on the cross.

And my brothers and sisters, it is so important for us to get this-to understand this clearly: Jesus didn't just die for a mass of faceless humanity-he doesn't just desire the "love of humanity" in a general, "be nice to each other" kind of way. No, rather, Jesus died and loves YOU!!! Personally, individually, and concretely!!! He desires that love of him would blaze within each one of our hearts for him personally, individually, and concretely! And Jesus' anguish is great until this is accomplished in each one of our lives. It is this love that is meant to cause division-division from a false view of the world that only seeks after power, money, pleasure, social influence, or any other created good on this earth as my ultimate destiny.-Jesus love causes division with the values of a fallen world dominated and obsessed with sin. He offers us so much more. This is also what causes Jesus' anguish-That he sees what we are made for-he knows what we could be-filled with divine love and the power of the holy Spirit and destined for a life of glory beyond this world that we cannot even begin to imagine-and tragically we so often are content with something less-something that is not worthy of our dignity. In the words of the great Christian writer C.S. Lewis **"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."**

So my brothers and sisters, the challenge for us this week is to allow ourselves to be burned by the divine fire of Jesus' love and to respond to this reality with a blazing love of our own. Pope Benedict XVI described this divine fire in this way: **"A fire that is to be handed on. Whoever comes close to him must be prepared to be burned. This is a fire that makes things bright and pure and free and grand. Being a Christian, then, is daring to entrust oneself to this burning fire."** He goes on to say **"The message of the Church is there precisely in order to conflict with our behavior, to tear man out of his life of lies and to bring clarity and truth. Truth makes demands, and it also burns."**

We can even see this in the world of nature. I'm sure many of us are familiar with the wildfires that so often rage on the west side of the country, particularly in California. As we know, these fires can be extremely devastating and dangerous if they occur near population centers. However, on a natural level they are also helpful and even necessary as they clear out deadwood and brush and make it possible for new vegetation and life to flourish. It also allows sunlight to penetrate to areas in the forest where it couldn't reach before which also aids in the growth of native species.

The same reality is true in our spiritual life-we need to allow ourselves to be set on fire with Jesus' divine love so that it can clear out and destroy those parts of us that are in rebellion towards God, or mistrustful of his goodness, or obsessed with the things of the world. Once that is cleared out-God's love can have its intended transforming effect in our lives and our world.

The most concrete, practical way of doing this is prayer (I know-it seems like it's the answer to everything-well, it generally is! ☺) I know I've already preached (probably ad nauseam to some) about how to do this practically (spending time in silent prayer for at least 5 minutes and reading the scriptures each day). However, today I want to end with describing the attitude we should take to prayer. This is crucial, particularly if our prayer life has been lackadaisical, or if we aren't praying consistently, or we are allowing other things to take priority over spending time with Jesus each day. The attitude/mindset I'd like us to focus on in prayer is simply this: **Jesus desires this time with me more than I do with him.** I'll repeat that: Jesus, the son of God, who created me out of love and who is the only person that can make me truly happy, desires the time I spend in prayer with him infinitely more than I do with him. Jesus truly "thirsts" for individual prayer time with us! Again he loves us individually, not as a faceless glob of humanity. So he is in "great anguish" for our personal time of prayer-because that is the time where we truly come to know him in a personal way and can respond to his blazing love for us-with a fire of our own, however small and insignificant or badly made that fire might seem to us, it's incredibly precious in his eyes and he longs for it. He longs for us to give him our hearts and he is ok with taking it in small chunks if that's what we can manage!

Pope Benedict the XVI once said: "**Many people perceive Christianity as something institutional - rather than as an encounter with Christ - which explains why they don't see it as a source of joy.**" Prayer is where we encounter Christ and experience the joy he offers. My brothers and sisters, Jesus longs for our hearts in prayer and is in anguish until we respond to his love with our own. Let's not keep him waiting! AMEN!

